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ABSTRACT

A nationwide study was conducted to examine how U.S. colleges and universities organize, staff, and operate their various programs to meet the needs of the low-achieving student and to document the extensive literacy problem facing all institutions of higher education. Every two- and four-year college in the country was surveyed, and 58% (N=1,452) responded. Selected findings included the following: (1) only 160 institutions reported that they had no basic skills programs, courses, or alternatives for meeting literacy needs; (2) public institutions and larger colleges were more likely to respond to low-achieving students; (3) basic skills courses were the most typical response to low-achieving students; (4) academic officers were generally responsible for policies regarding the evaluation of student assessment and success; (5) student follow-up policies existed only to a limited extent in all reporting institutions; (6) peer counseling was not well accepted among the respondents; (7) more than 50% of the institutions offered orientation programs for low-achieving students; (8) the most common retention strategies included orientation programs, special services for low-achieving students, and institutional self-study; and (9) respondents reported plans to improve programs, though they projected staff reductions in some areas. (LAL)

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For further information, see: Roueche, John E., Baker, George A., and Roueche, Suanne D. *College Responses to Low-Achieving Students: A Report of a National Study*. New York: HBJ Media Systems, Incorporated, 1984.

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COLLEGE RESPONSES TO LOW-ACHIEVING STUDENTS: A NATIONAL STUDY

In 1977, Roueche and Snow investigated what colleges were doing to assist low-achieving students and published the findings from the responses of 300 two- and four-year colleges. They found that well-designed remedial programs, implemented by appropriately-trained teachers and counselors can indeed positively affect the success of these students at the college level. Now, a new national study, conducted five years later at the University of Texas, has been completed. Expanded to include every two- and four-year institution of higher education in the country, this study is the first of its kind. It sought to discover and report how American colleges and universities organize, staff and operate their various programs to meet the needs of the low-achieving student and to document the extensive literacy problem that all institutions of higher education are facing.

The National Study

This recent study sought (1) to analyze responses to low-achieving students by *institutional type*: research universities, doctoral degree-granting universities, comprehensive colleges and universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges; and (2) to compare these results with the Roueche-Snow study, building the questionnaire upon the earlier design and organizing it into six basic areas: institutional context, policies and procedures, organization for delivery of basic skills, retention information, future directions, respondent information. Response rate to this national study was 58 percent; only 160 institutions of the 1,452 (returning usable questionnaires) reported that they had no basic skills programs, courses, or alternatives for meeting literacy needs. Major findings are included in this capsulated version.

Institutional Context

1. The larger the institution, the more likely that it offers basic skills (reading, writing, math) programs, courses, or services.
2. Institutions typically respond to low-achieving students by providing basic skills courses. The larger the institution, the more likely that the courses are offered in a large academic unit; the smaller the institution, the more likely that the courses are provided within discipline areas. Most provide a special array of services, in addition to programs and courses, to low-achieving students.
3. Public institutions offer more services to low-achieving students than do private; inner-city institutions respond to a greater extent than do rural or urban.

Policies and Procedures

1. Academic officers generally are responsible for policy regarding the evaluation of student assessment and success, executive officers for faculty evaluation. Open admissions policies typically are not written at the governing board level.
2. The college catalog, generally regarded as a handbook for student use, is used by the majority of institutions to state policy regarding students and faculty, including student retention policies: implying a traditional message--that student retention is the primary responsibility of the student, not of the institution.
3. Student follow-up policies--by which to assess causes of attrition--exist only to a limited extent in all reporting institutions.
4. Policy development for organizing/implementing developmental programs is generally unstructured.

Organization for Delivery of Basic Skills

1. Tutoring programs and learning centers typically operate either within an organizational structure for basic skills or independently of that structure and supportive of other institutional efforts.
2. The larger the institution, the more likely that the administrator in all three skill areas is full-time or serves in that capacity as a primary duty.
3. Full- and part-time faculty teach in basic skill areas. The majority of institutions use full-time faculty; a high percentage of doctoral-granting institutions, comprehensive colleges, and community colleges assign greater numbers of instructors on a part-time basis than do other types.
4. The majority of institutional groups assign counselors to basic skills programs either on a full- or part-time basis. Three-to-one they favor individual counseling to group counseling. Peer counseling is not well accepted among the respondents.

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5. More than one-half of the institutions offer orientation programs for low-achieving students. Larger institutions with large enrollments are more likely to provide this service.
6. Most award institutional credit for basic skills courses: (1) more institutions are awarding credit and applying it toward degrees, and (2) a greater number of all institutions are now awarding credit for basic skills courses than was true five years ago.
7. Most institutions offer full-semester or quarter-length developmental courses.
8. All responding groups favor mandatory pre-assessment. There is significant variance, however, among groups and among assessment practices within the three skills areas.
9. All groups are significantly more committed to mandatory assessment than to mandatory placement.
10. All groups continue to place emphasis on high school grades for placement.
11. Institutions vary in regard to using in-house or commercially-prepared skills tests. (Most community colleges prefer to develop their own.)
12. Over one-half of all institutions use assessment techniques in prescribing instruction, employ self-paced modules, and administer exit tests in skill areas.
13. Most institutions report that they articulate basic skill courses with later content-oriented courses.
14. Sixty percent of the respondents use learning modules and practice accommodation of learning styles; forty percent use more traditional instructional strategies.
15. Students have less flexibility in entering or beginning a course than in completing and exiting one.
16. The majority of institutions report mandatory attendance standards.
17. Significantly less than half set/enforce policies balancing college and outside workloads.
18. More than half of the responding institutions employ standard grading practices in basic skills courses.
19. Evaluation of student learning in basic skills courses is practiced to a greater degree than is evaluation of subsequent student performance in curriculum programs.
20. Evaluation conducted to determine student retention within programs occurs more often than does the evaluation of student satisfaction.
21. Research universities are more likely to conduct program evaluation of basic skills instruction than any other institutional group.
22. Less than half of all responding reported that they evaluate cost effectiveness of basic skills efforts.

Retention Information

1. The most common retention strategies include: orientation programs for new students, special services and programs for low-achieving students, and self-study to determine institutional success and retention rates. Less common strategies include: exit review process, exit testing of students completing basic courses, staff development relating to retention, and departmental retention task forces.
2. Considering all institutional responses, approximately 15 percent of entering freshmen are assigned to basic skills courses, and approximately 33 percent complete this work after one semester or quarter.

Future Directions

1. Responding institutions are planning to improve programs for low-achieving students, particularly in the areas of curriculum and instruction, and to strengthen evaluation and retention efforts.
2. However, they report a planned staffing decrease in administrative, professional, and counseling positions among those serving low-achieving students. (Community colleges report plans to improve entry-level assessment and staff development.)

Responses to low-achieving students are pervasive among all institutional types. However, the mere existence of a basic skills effort is not enough; the effort must be effective, making a positive difference in the academic performance of these underprepared students. Unfortunately, as our study sadly concludes, few institutions know whether or not their efforts are successful; serious, intensive program evaluation has not yet become a high priority for the overwhelming majority. But complacency about the need for such programs appears to be on the wane, studies such as this one can provide important state-of-the-art information to highlight current efforts as well as to focus upon those glaring inconsistencies and oversights that prevent our doing all that is possible in effectively dealing with the current literacy problem.

For further information, see: Roueche, John E., Baker, George A., and Roueche, Suanne D. *College Responses to Low-Achieving Students: A Report of a National Study*. New York: HBJ Media Systems, Incorporated, 1984.

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